

When Lee's Men

By Harold Lambert

Education Division, Conservation Commission

Failed to Fight

19m — The Gazette's Magazine Section, February 3, 1937

Charleston W. Va

AS FAR AS West Virginia of 1861 was concerned—General Robert E. Lee "should have stood home."

This month is Virginia Heritage Month, and Old Dominion observances begin with the 150th anniversary of the birth of Robert E. Lee. Some of this fervor is leaking into the Mountain State.

The Allegheny foothills were Lee's Moscow, reminiscent of Napoleon's defeat and disaster at the prime of his career. But it brought the greying Southern commander a first-hand look at a war that was to bring both disaster and triumph to his star-studded career.

First, it exploded the myth that "a Southerner can lick ten Yankees." Here Lee saw his own soldiers break and retreat against orders to charge. He learned that a lot of glamor went out of war when soldiers began to desert and slip over the hill into the rhododendron jungles.

Next, the wars of West Virginia gave Lee an insight into the future of two of his favorites, Maj. John Washington and Gen. R. S. Garnett, were killed. To this early point in the war, these were the most important deaths on either side as they involved a president's nephew and a member of the Southern general staff. And at the same time, Lee experienced deals with soldiers of his own army

who refused—or were reluctant—to obey official orders.

And General Lee got an insight into the calibre of the mountain men who made up a large part of the Army of Northern Virginia. It is probably that such rough schooling in West Virginia gave Lee the experience that was to make him one of the most understanding and capable officers who have ever strode this continent.

• • •

GEN. ROBERT E. LEE came to West Virginia from Staunton, Va., having ridden the railroad that far toward the mountains where he had been sent to stop the tide of Northern invasion. Lee looked forward to the venture because his own son, Major Rooney Lee, was stationed here. Brig. Gen. R. S. Garnett had been sent to hold the Northerners from further advances, and Lee heard the news that the rebel armies in the hills were retreating—that they had abandoned Grafton, opening the route to conquest of that entire area by the Yankees.

Lee first arrived in Huntersville, Pocahontas County, where he inspected a temporary hospital full of smallpox and measles victims. The roads were poor, and many of the people were hostile to the Confederates—not from particular Northern sympathies—but because of native Anglo-Saxon suspicion of any stranger. They were the people who had dropped off the first wagons and exploring parties when this country was settled. There were few slaves here, and most of the people eked a living from small farms.

THE FEDERALS held Cheat Mountain, sprawling their troops along the sides of the Greenbrier River. Gen. W. W. Loring, in command at Huntersville, was stalling and reluctant to make an attack as the enemy kept building stronger fortifications. Loring's timidity was losing the campaign at this point. Lee utterly failed in an attempt to urge the timid general into action, and he went on to Valley Mountain. Loring had shown no inclination to obey Lee, although was his superior. It was Lee's first experience with a disobedient general officer. He was learning.

The rains were making war more terrible here in the hills. Soldiers wrote home that the mud was so deep that mules "sank up to their ears" along the crooked dirt roads.

A few days later Lee had mapped out a plan to take Cheat Mountain. "A battle must come off, and I am anxious to begin it," he wrote home. Col. Albert Rust of Arkansas had asked that he be allowed to lead the column which was first to attack the blue-coats. The plan was to take Cheat Mountain and clear Tygart's Valley. For some strange reason, Rust completely froze when his order came, and he refused to make the attack he had insisted be his privilege. This threw the entire plan out of order. All the other officers were sullen and defiant of Lee's orders to get into the fight—and the battle plan completely flubbed as it was born. Lee might as well have been a drummer boy for all the authority he commanded that day.

LEE WROTE HOME: "I can not tell you my regret and mortification at the untoward events that caused the failure of the plan. I had taken every precaution to ensure success and counted on it. But the Ruler of the Universe willed otherwise. We are no worse off now than before."

He wrote Gov. Letcher of Virginia of his trouble with the weather and his officers. But he added "please do not speak of it; we must try again."

In Richmond, later, the battle plan was examined and every staff officer agreed that Lee would easily have taken Cheat Mountain if his officers had cooperated. And it was later revealed that Col. Rust's intelligence had frightened him with tales that there were about 1,000 men lined up against him. Official records show that Rust had 1,000 men—and the enemy had but 300 that day. It would have been over in minutes—but the bravery of the Confederacy had yet to be displayed and the great legends were not yet in the making.

WITH A HEAVY HEART, Lee now went to Sewell Mountain in Fayette County, where Gen. John B. Floyd was camped. The most important thing Lee did here was start his fabulous white beard. Prior to this time Lee had worn only a moustache. Actually, it all began because he lost his razor.

At Sewell, Lee was again disappointed. His officers were squabbling among themselves like children. He told one lieutenant, as he dressed him down for lack of information: "This is in keeping with everything else I find

here—no order, no organization; nobody knows where anything is; no one understands his duty; officers and men are equally ignorant. This will not do."

Meanwhile, the Federals withdrew without battle due to the Confederate timidity. This section of West Virginia was then abandoned to the Federals never to be won back. It was the first major setback for the Confederates in the war, and meant that the Union would be able to choose their own battlefields to a considerable disadvantage to the gray warriors.

LEE WAS HAPPY to get back to Richmond. Jefferson Davis later told of the defeated general's return from the disasters of West Virginia. "He came back carrying the heavy weight of defeat, and unappreciated by the people . . . for they could not know . . . that, if his plans and orders had been carried out, the result would have been victory."

But Lee would not watch an cowardly and disobedient staff. Davis wrote the Governor of South Carolina to take it easy in criticizing Lee. "Lee stood in silence, without defending himself," Davis wrote. "For he was unwilling to offend any one who was wearing a sword and striking blows for the Confederacy."

There were better days ahead. Lee's bust is in the Hall of Fame today, but after the mountain campaign in West Virginia they were calling him "a showy presence," a "historic name," and "Granny Lee."

He didn't have much fun in West Virginia.

end

Article clipped by
Lant Rader Slawer